The East and West Wings of the White House

ELLEN ROBINSON EPSTEIN

When the Federal Government was moved from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., the first building planned was the President's House. A competition was held in 1799 for its design and James Hoban, an Irish immigrant architect then residing in South Carolina, was awarded First Prize.

Hoban designed a three-story Palladian style building with a terrace and a wing extending on each side of the mansion. When the White House was built, however, neither the third story nor the wings and terraces were constructed, chiefly because of lack of funds. In the course of time the third story was constructed out of the previous attic and the intended extensions were added to both the east and the west sides.

The historian William H. Prescott has written that

> the surest test of the civilization of a people—at least, as sure as any—afforded by mechanical art is to be found in their architecture, which presents so noble a field for the display of the grand and the beautiful, and which, at the same time, is so intimately connected with the essential comforts of life.[1]

Applying Prescott's test to the President's House, which from its beginning has served both as his place of business and as his residence, it should have, but did not always exemplify "the display of the grand and the beautiful," nor was it at all times "intimately connected with the essential comforts of life."

Historians writing of the White House have made these points in

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I would like to thank my husband, David, for his help and guidance during the many hours spent revising, editing, and proofreading this paper. Without his patience and understanding the task would have been much more difficult.

[1] William H. Prescott, *History of The Conquest of Peru.* Introduction by Samuel Eliot Morison. (New York, The Heritage Press, 1957.) Book I, Chapter V, p. 72.

discussing various aspects of the history of the mansion but surprisingly they have largely ignored the wings of the White House, where, at various periods, the character of the mansion was determined. To understand the White House requires a comprehensive view. Others have described the mansion; this paper is a history of the wings.

THE FIRST EXTENSION

The second resident of the President's House, Thomas Jefferson, who had himself submitted a design in the competition for its plan, called the mansion, after moving into it, "large enough for two emperors, one Pope and a Grand Lama." In apparent conflict with this evaluation, Jefferson directed the architect Benjamin H. Latrobe to build two additions to the mansion to extend 150 feet on each side. The presidential instructions to Latrobe were a blend of Hoban's original design for the wings and Jefferson's own admiration for classical Roman architecture.[2]

These Jeffersonian additions were used as "offices," a word which at that time connoted household facilities such as kitchens, pantries, ice houses, coal bins, stables, saddle rooms, and hen houses, all disguised behind the new classical colonnades. Some writers have erroneously concluded that Jefferson used these "offices" in today's sense of the word, as a place for the transaction of business and clerical affairs. This was not their function.

These terraces, or colonnades, did little to alleviate overcrowding in the mansion, and subsequent presidential families frequently complained about limitations of space.

The point was made dramatically in 1860, when the Prince of Wales, later to become Edward VII, visited the United States. This, the first official visit of British royalty to the United States, unless one reckons the visit by "representatives" of the Crown in 1814, caused protocol problems for the White House. President James Buchanan, a former Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and his accomplished niece, Harriet Lane, who served her bachelor uncle as hostess both in England and in the White House, were eager to entertain the Prince in a suitable manner. The White House could not provide adequate accommodations for the Prince and his entourage because the President's office and his living quarters occupied the second floor of the mansion and the first floor was devoted entirely to ceremonial

[2] Hoban's original drawing has been lost but from other primary sources and from copy drawings of the plan made contemporaneously with Hoban's design we can be fairly sure that Hoban intended terraces and wings to be added to the mansion. Jefferson undoubtedly knew of Hoban's design.

rooms. The only spare bedroom in the mansion was given to the Prince. His Minister of State, the Duke of Newcastle, was given the President's private bedroom. The President was relegated to a couch in the public anteroom.

MICHLER'S SOLUTION

The Civil War intervened and left little time or money for such concerns as the President's House. Two years after the end of the war a solution was proposed by Brigadier General Nathaniel Michler. Michler, a member of the Corps of Engineers of the United States Army in charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, studied the conditions in the White House and found that the President's staff had, during the war years, encroached upon the entire eastern portion of the second floor of the mansion.[3] The Jefferson-Latrobe colonnades, originally used for storage space, were now smothered by the attached greenhouses on the west and, on the east, with the growth of the White House staff and kitchen requirements. The mansion was unbearably cramped.

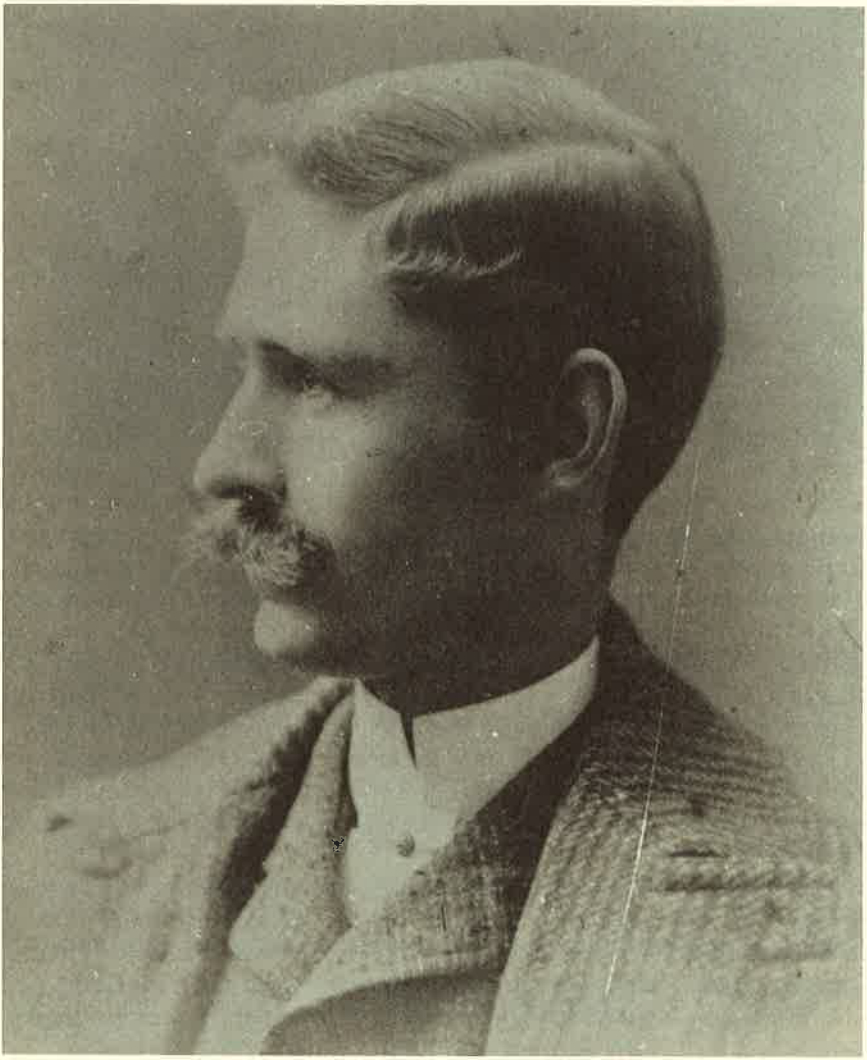
In addition to the problems of overcrowding, Michler considered many complaints about the White House site. At that time, immediately to the south of the mansion, along the route of today's Constitution Avenue, flowed a branch of the Potomac River. The ill effects arising from these waters and swampy land were, in the view of some, a cause of the death in 1841 of President William Henry Harrison; yet not until 1871 was the canal filled in, only then controlling this source of malaria and miasma.[4]

Michler proposed a solution to the two-fold problem of space and health: the abandonment of the mansion as a residence and its limited use solely as a place of business. The President and his family would live elsewhere, on a site to be selected from one of eleven proposed areas which included, among others, the estate at Meridian Hill. Michler's report was presented to Congress but failed to receive legislative support, partly because of a strong outcry against moving the President's residence. Another factor which may have influenced

[3] For Michler's report see the *Report of the Chief of Engineers Accompanying the Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1867,* Appendix T and T-1, pp. 519, 532–538. The report can be found also in Senate Miscellaneous Document 21, 39th Congress, 2nd Session, January 1867, and the *Congressional Globe,* 39th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 147, pp. 1577–1579.

[4] John B. Blake, the Commissioner of Public Buildings in 1857, wrote: "The President's House, as is well known, is in a very unhealthy location. Its inmates are subject to intermittent fever, which of late years has proved obstinate to cure." See the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Public Buildings,* Record Group 42, National Archives.

this proposal's defeat was that Andrew Johnson was President at this time and was not liked by many members of Congress. The men who were in the process of trying to impeach the President would hardly be enthusiastic about building or buying him a new home. Con-



Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King Memorial Library, Washington, D.C.

Figure 1. Frederick D. Owen, architect of the 1891 and 1901 plans for an expanded White House.

sequently in the following years, despite occasional other proposals, Presidents continued to reside and work in an unchanged White House.[5]

MRS. HARRISON'S PLAN

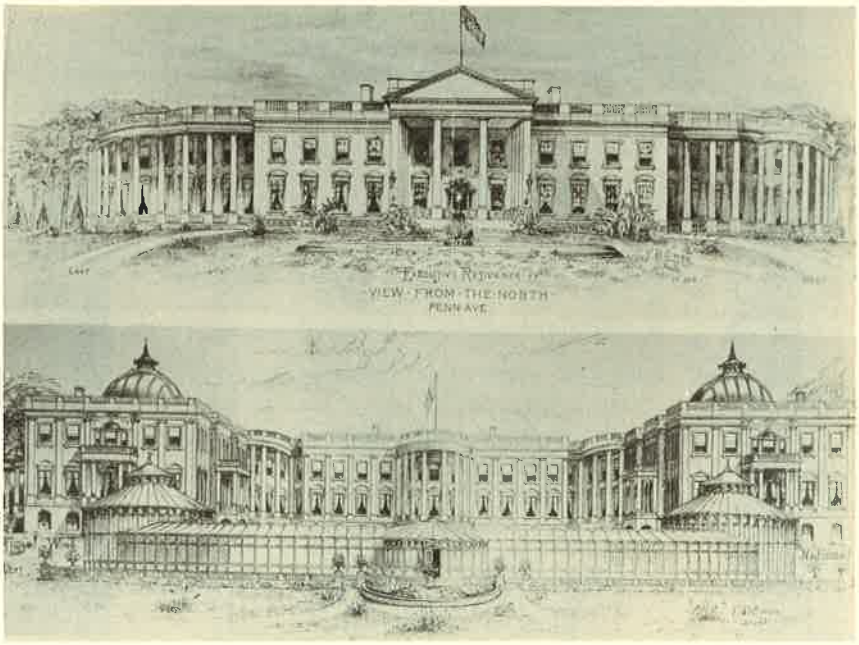
In 1891, Caroline Scott Harrison, wife of President Benjamin Harrison (grandson of President William Henry Harrison), a talented woman with strong artistic inclinations which were evidenced by her floral designs for some of the White House china, prepared, with the professional assistance of a Washington architect, Frederick D. Owen, elaborate plans for extensions to the White House.

"Mrs. Harrison's Plan," as it became known, provided sufficient space for the President and Mrs. Harrison, for Mrs. Harrison's father, for the President's and Mrs. Harrison's two children and their respective spouses, five grandchildren, governesses, servants, and pets, all of whom were then living in the western half of the second floor of the White House.

Mrs. Harrison's plan envisioned an elaborate rectangular complex of buildings: on the east, a National Wing for a historical art gallery; on the west, an Official Wing for diplomatic receptions and staff functions, both joined to the mansion by small halls or rotundas to house statuary and painting of Americans and Americana. Also proposed was a glass greenhouse, stretching across the south lawn, parallel to, and with the same linear dimensions as, the White House. In the center of this rectangle, created by the two wings, the greenhouses and the White House, was a courtyard which would contain an allegorical grouping of statues commemorating three important events in American history: (1) the discovery of America on October 12, 1492; (2) the laying of the cornerstone of the White House on October 13, 1792; and hardly last in importance, (3) the laying of the cornerstone for Mrs. Harrison's Plan, an event scheduled to occur on October 12, 1892.

This baroque plan violated the basic simplicity of Hoban's original design and was more an expression of the Gilded Age than of that period of republican simplicity in which the White House originally was conceived. Ironically, her plan was not approved by Congress, not for reasons of aesthetics, but because of President Harrison's viola-

[5] For additional proposals see: Journal of the Senate, S. 1842, Serial 1984; Journal of the House, H.R. 5988, Serial 2008; Senate Miscellaneous Document No. 81, Serial 1993; Senate Report No. 451, Serial 2359; House Report No. 4042, Serial 2890, Journal of the Senate, January 28, 1890, page 97 Serial 2677, and Senate Bill 1842 in 1882 and Senate Bill 1868 in 1886.



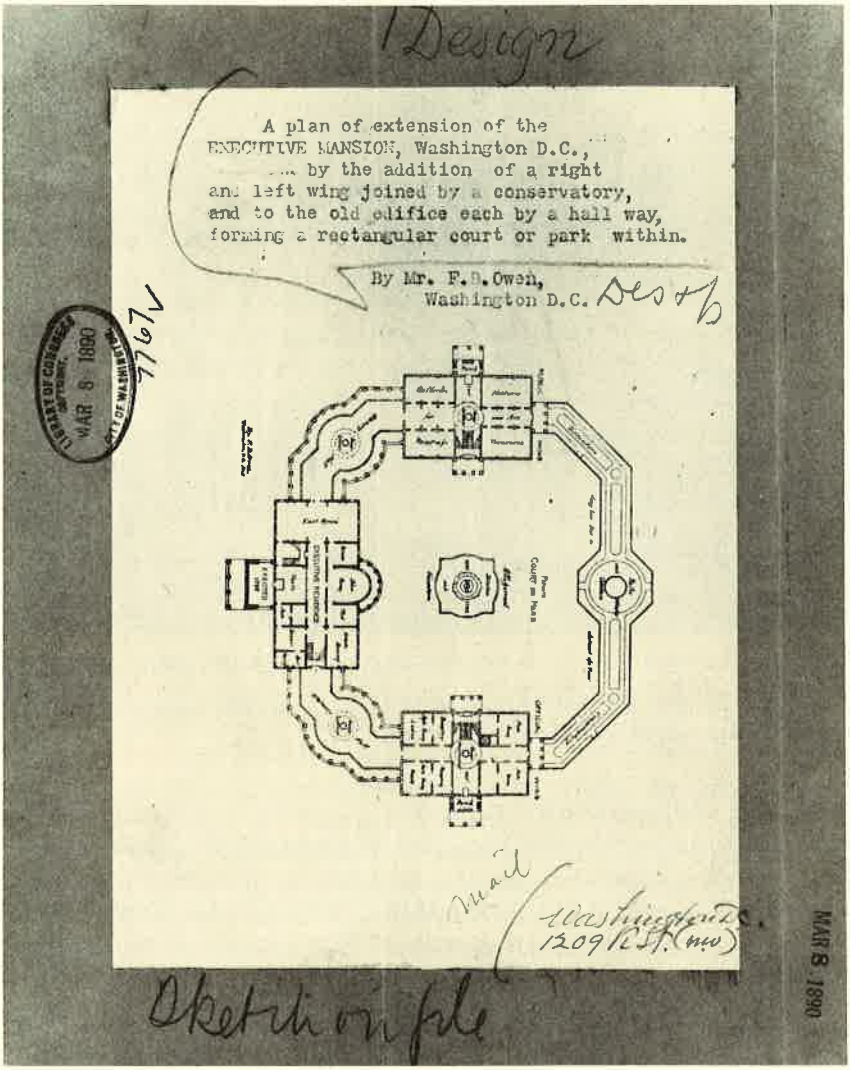
Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

Figure 2. Mrs. Harrison's Plan of 1891. Top, as seen from Pennsylvania Avenue. Bottom, as seen from the Ellipse.

tions of a well-established principle: powerful politicians must be satisfied. A year earlier the President had refused to appoint Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed's candidate to the office of the Collector of Customs in Portland, Maine, and for this slight, "Czar" Reed, so appropriately characterized, refused to allow the Harrison legislation to come to a vote. In retrospect, this twist of fate was a fortunate one, allowing the White House to remain in its original Palladian style and preventing it from becoming something wholly different from what it was in the past. Less than a year later Caroline Scott Harrison was dead and there was no one to champion her plan.

THE BINGHAM PROPOSAL

The year 1900 was the centennial both for the city of Washington and for the White House. One of the events in the celebration of the anniversary year included the unveiling of a plan for an extended White House by Colonel Theodore A. Bingham. As the Officer in



Copyright Division, Library of Congress

Figure 3. One of several sketches deposited by Frederick D. Owen with the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress. Owen had several plans, all of which were basically the same but varied slightly in the design of the Official and Public Wings.

Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds,[6] Bingham, a very self-assured and aggressive man, wanted an accomplishment to his credit while in this office. On December 12, 1900, in the East Room of the White House, in the presence of President William McKinley, Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt, Admiral George Dewey, members of the Supreme Court, and other elite government officials, Bingham dramatically unveiled his red-draped, palm-banked model. This model, although not quite so elaborate, closely adhered to the earlier plan of Mrs. Harrison, a predictable result of the fact that Frederick D. Owen was the architect of both designs.[7]

The following day, December 13, 1900, the American Institute of Architects vehemently denounced the plan, calling it "a mongrel," a "monstrosity," and "an unrecognizable contraption out of harmony with, and destroying, the individuality of the old building." [8] The Institute then voted resolutions which stated that the White House was one of the best examples of American architecture and that a committee of architects should be appointed to consider any contemplated changes in the mansion.[9] Either because of this criticism or other circumstances the Bingham plan, much to its sponsor's disappointment, was set aside.

THE FIRST MR. ROOSEVELT

In September 1901, Theodore Roosevelt became President following the assasination of William McKinley. With his wife, six somewhat untamed children, and their various pets and toys—a kangaroo rat, bicycles, skates, wooden stilts and marbles[10]—the family and per-

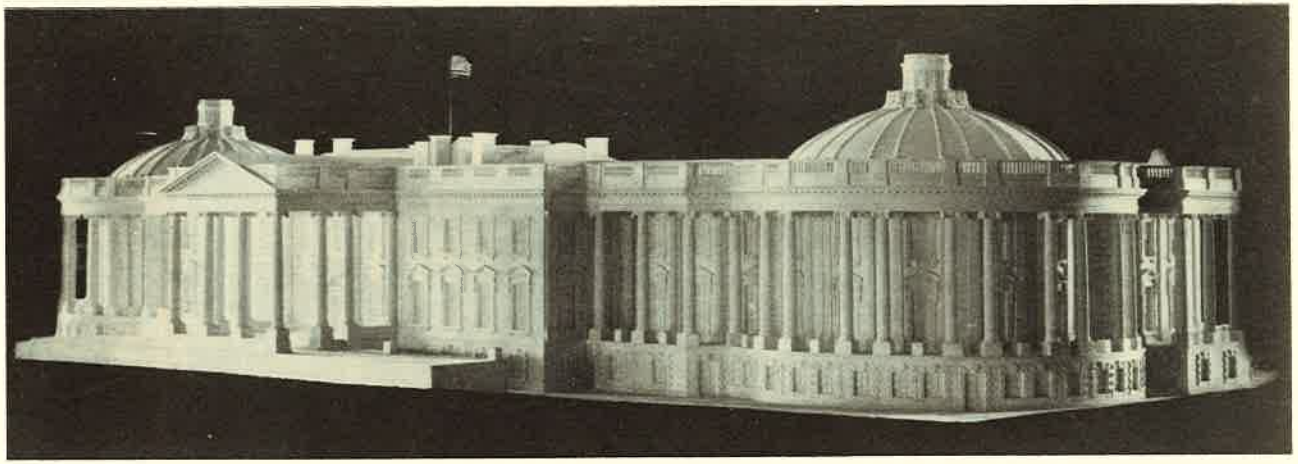
[6] This extremely prestigious position, filled by an Army colonel from the War Department, was a presidential appointment. The specific office was in existence from 1867 until 1925 when the duties of this position were assumed by an employee of the Department of the Interior. In the years following the responsibility for the White House was repeatedly transferred among a variety of positions until these basic power were given to the Chief Usher.

[7] Frederick D. Owen went into government employ in 1899, joining the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds at the request of Colonel Bingham. Among his many duties were designing the decorations for the Inaugural Parade and Ball every fourth year. Owen was also the designer of the police badges for the District of Columbia Police Department, the first War Room for President McKinley, and the first Presidential flag.

[8] Bess Furman, *White House Profile* (New York, 1951), p. 262. See also: Glenn Brown, "Roosevelt and the Fine Arts", *American Architect,* vol. 116, December 17, 1919, pp. 739–52; Glenn Brown, "Personal Reminiscences of Charles Follen McKim", *Architectural Record,* vol. 39, January 1916, pp. 84–88.

[9] Furman, *op. cit.,* p. 262.

[10] Ike Hoover, *Forty-Two Years in the White House* (Boston, 1934), p. 29. Hoover came to the White House as an electrician in the administration of President Benjamin Harrison (both the President and his wife were reluctant to turn the electric lights on or off) and was later elevated to the position of Chief Usher.



1901 Annual Report of the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds

Figure 4. The 1900 Model promoted by Colonel Theodore A. Bingham.

sonal staff occupied the entire residential space on the second floor of the mansion, spilling into the presidential office space. The children on occasion were seen running through their father's office while he conducted affairs of state. While the White House may have been a source of pleasure for the presidential children, it was anything but this for the official staff: fifteen men were assigned to an office suitable for three. With this large family and the new large presidential staff, these conditions were no longer tolerable. Theodore Roosevelt personally selected McKim, Mead, and White, of New York, the preeminent architectural firm of the day, designers of the New York Public Library, numerous buildings at Harvard, Columbia, and New York Universities and several buildings at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, for White House renovation. Following the designs and plans prepared by McKim, Mead, and White, construction began on the White House in 1902, and for a period of four months the presidential family moved to a temporary home at 22 (now 736) Jackson Place on Lafayette Square.

Work executed in the mansion proper included the conversion of a third story from an attic to living space and the reconstruction of the basement for use as a kitchen, laundry, and drying room. Prior to this time, the First Family hung its laundry in the outdoor drying yard near the vegetable garden, both of which were immediately to the south of the West Colonnade. Only in America can one imagine a Chief of State looking out of his dining room to see the family linen on the line and turnips in the garden.

In addition to work on the mansion, the long colonnades extending east and west were rebuilt and buildings at each wing were added. On the east, where an entire wing once existed but had been removed either in the latter part of the Andrew Johnson administration or in the early part of the Grant administration,[11] McKim, Mead, and White specified a colonnade and wing with a handsome portico and porte-cochere. When completed, the new addition became the official entrance for White House visitors.

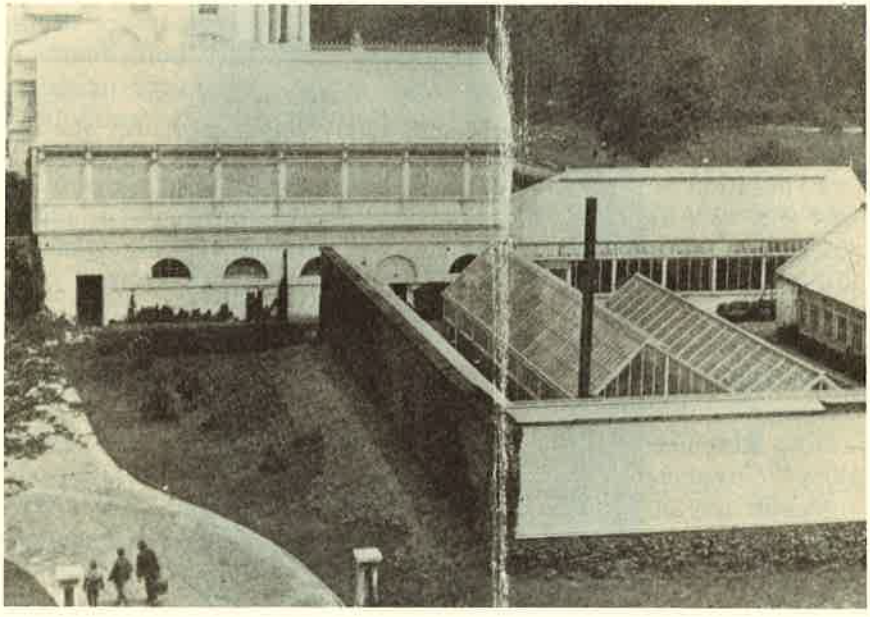
The most needed of the additions was built on the west, a one-story "temporary" office building with an attic and structural support sufficient for an additional story. Located at the end of the West Colonnade, the latter newly visible after the greenhouses had been dismantled to provide space for the extension,[12] this West Wing was

[11] Research into primary source material in Record Group 42 has failed to provide a definite date for the dismantling of the East Wing.

[12] The greenhouses were moved to the foot of 15th Street, very near the spot which the Bureau of Printing and Engraving occupies today.

Library of Congress

Figure 5. The McKim, Mead, and White new East Portico of 1902. The colonnade was also rebuilt at this time.



1900 Annual Report of the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds

Figure 6. The White House greenhouses and conservatories about 1898. In the upper left corner of the photograph can be seen the South Portico of the mansion. The West Wing is today located on this site.

to be used until a permanent office building was constructed since, at the time, Congress gave its approval for a temporary structure for this site. The office was approximately 100 feet by 50 feet and included a private office for the President, a large room for the Cabinet, and a reception area for congressional and other official visitors. Adjacent to the new presidential office was the tennis court where, in this athletic President's administration, according to legend, Cabinet "meetings" were often conducted, and on which Roosevelt was playing when he heard his secretary, William Loeb, Jr. shout from a window in the presidential office that William Howard Taft, the President's hand-picked choice as his successor, had received the 1908 Republican nomination.

When they were completed, the President was delighted with the offices, although not everyone was quite so pleased. The building was ridiculed and condemned in Congress. One member termed it "unfit to accomodate a second-class lawyer or a third-rate doctor";[13] while another called it "an abortion." [14] The Washington *Post* referred to the building as "an abomination" [15] and a national periodical wrote that it was "an example of Congressional niggardliness . . . as plain as a pipestaff within" and that it was "mostly regarded with regret." [16] Charles F. McKim was attacked as one of those "high priced architects" [17] in spite of the fact that he had returned more than $7,000 in unused funds. Dissatisfaction with the offices was expressed by those who viewed them as too simple and who felt that a more ornate building would have been more appropriate, but today this simplicity of design in the wings, which affords priority to the White House, is generally regarded as evidence of the sound architectural judgement of McKim whose buildings were usually more ornate than austere.

THE 1909 OVAL

Less than seven years later, in the Taft administration, the need for additional space once again became so acute that yet another extension was built, this time by Nathan C. Wyeth, a private Washington architect, later municipal architect of this city. Wyeth, having rejected the idea of adding an additional story to the office building for fear of dwarfing the White House, added instead an extra 50 feet

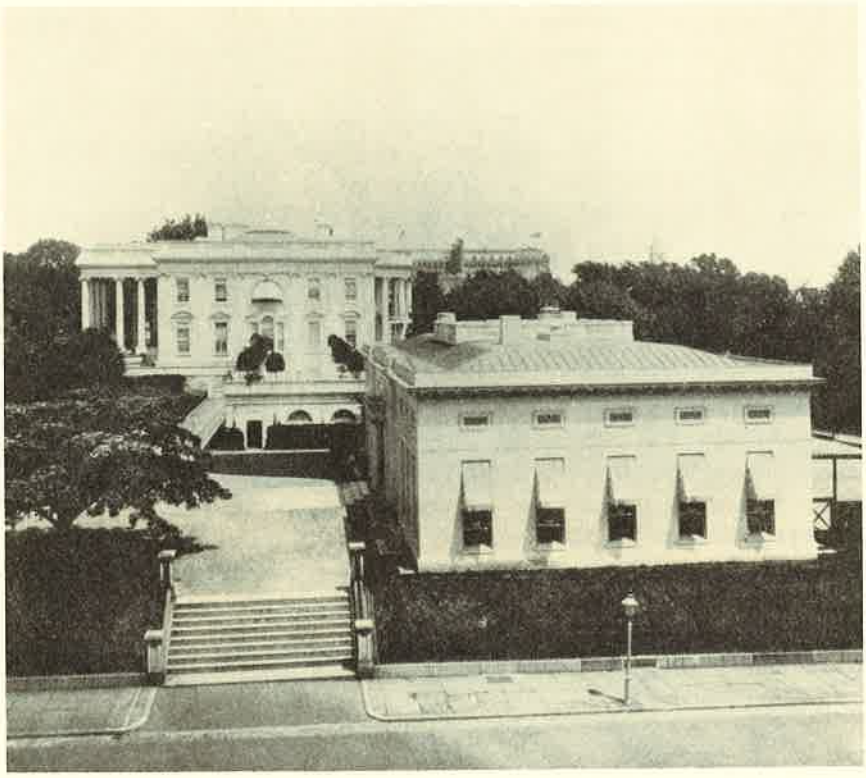
[13] *Congressional Record,* 58th Congress, 2nd Session, vol. 38, part 3, Senate debate of February 29, 1904; Senator Jacob H. Gallinger, Republican, of New Hampshire.

[14] *Ibid.,* Senator Benjamin R. Tillman, Democrat, of South Carolina.

[15] The Washington *Post,* March 1, 1904.

[16] A. Burnley Bibb, "The Restoration of the White House," *House and Garden,* March 1903, p. 135.

[17] *Congressional Record, op. cit.,* Senator Gallinger.



1903 Annual Report of the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds

Figure 7. The McKim, Mead, and White 1902 West Wing. The basement story of the building was entirely below ground. The tennis court can be seen on the right.

to the south, making the new extension approximately 100 feet by 100 feet.

The most dramatic design innovation was the new oval office for the President. By adopting Hoban's concept of an oval, which was to be found in the White House, Wyeth not only helped solve the spatial problems for the time being but with this beautiful, graceful curvilinear office he joined in spirit the West Wing with the White House. The President now had both an elegant and a distinctive office.

Wyeth's technological innovations included a simple air cooling and ventilating system. The system involved using air blown across blocks of ice trays of chemical dehydrants and was designed to remove

Courtesy of Mrs. Nathan C. Wyeth

Figure 8. Nathan C. Wyeth, architect of the 1909 addition and of the President's Oval Office.

moisture from the air and cool the oval office. Unable to keep the stout Mr. Taft cool, the system was pronounced a failure and abandoned.[18]

No construction work was done for the next twenty years, until after the West Wing was destroyed by a five-alarm fire in 1929. President Herbert Hoover, leaving a staff Christmas party in the East Room, watched the raging fire from the roof of the mansion while Mrs. Hoover and the guests remained inside listening to the Marine band play.[19] Reconstruction began the next day and the Wing was restored within a few months to its former condition.

THE WHITE HOUSE SWIMMING POOL

In March of 1933, the next occupant of the White House arrived. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had been an invalid for twelve years, required frequent physical therapy, his favorite form of exercise being swimming. To provide this facility for him, a nation-wide public subscription campaign, sponsored by more than forty newspapers, was initiated without his knowledge to raise sufficient funds for the construction of a pool in the West Colonnade. Approximately $22,316 was received in a month's time in cash, equipment, and services. To allow for the acceptance of the donations, authorization was sought from Congress, which, when assured that this campaign had begun without the previous knowledge or solicitation of the President, gave its approval. Within a few weeks construction began, and the pool, 15 feet by 50 feet and 8 feet in depth, was completed in thirty days.

ERIC GUGLER'S WORK

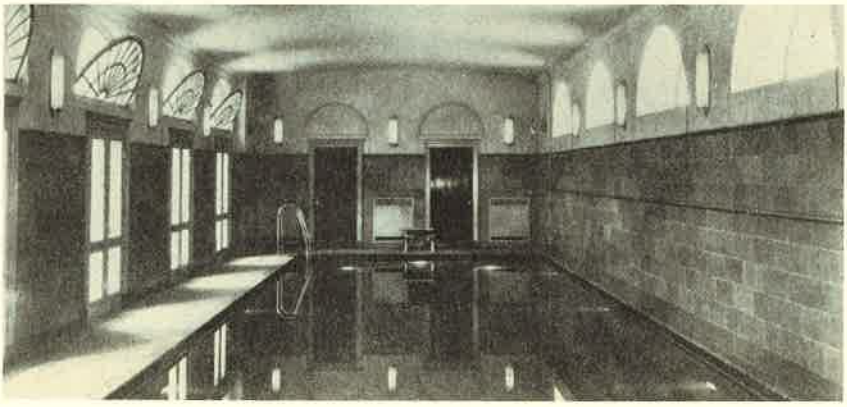
Extensive changes were made to the West Wing in 1934. Eric Gugler, a private architect from New York, promised the President that he could increase the interior space of the West Wing threefold without measurably affecting the exterior size of the building. This promise stemmed from Gugler's desire to persuade the President not to accept a design which can only be described as monstrous. That scheme envisioned a huge addition, one which would have dwarfed the White House. The President was persuaded and the architect proceeded to fulfill his promise. Gugler raised the West Wing roof several feet, thereby creating in a set-back, penthouse fashion, an

[18] "The President's Weather," *Literary Digest,* September 13, 1930, p. 27. It is also claimed that President Calvin Coolidge kept a gadget filled with chemicals on his desk to purify, or at least to deodorize, the air.

[19] "White House Fire," The Washington *Star,* December 25, 1929, p. 2.

1910 Annual Report of the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds

Figure 9. The 1909 addition. The Oval Office may be seen in the center of the south side of the building. On the west side an entrance has been opened to the basement story. (Compare with figure 7.)



Domestic Engineering, September 1933

Figure 10. The swimming pool in the West Colonnade.

additional story; renovated the basement to create additional office space; lowered the grade of West Executive Avenue, giving the west side basement rooms, for the first time, access to the outside and thus creating new office space; added a sunken courtyard with a fountain

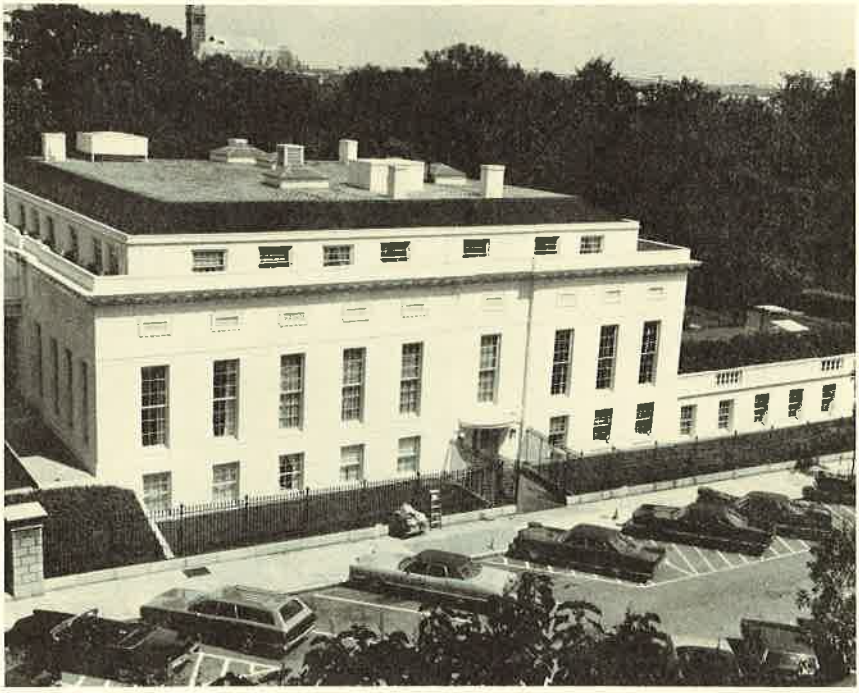
around which additional offices were installed but which were camaflouged by three feet of soil and grass; and moved the President's Oval Office from the center of the West Wing to the southeast corner of the building. With the completion of the extension of 1934, the executive offices of the President assumed the basic design which they have since had to this day.

Gugler's design thus maintained the integrity of the White House, providentially intervening, as had "Czar" Reed almost fifty years earlier, to foil a plan which would have accomplished the contrary.

General Services Administration

Figure 11. Eric Gugler's 1934 West Wing. (Compare with figures 7, 9, and 12.)

This photograph was taken in the early 1950's and the only visible differences are that the skylights on the roof no longer exist and the sunken court has been covered over. On the right can be seen where the court has been covered with sod in the center of the south extension. Gugler's work included moving the Oval Office from the center of the south side to the southeast corner, raising the second story roof to add a penthouse type third story, regrading West Executive Avenue to permit light to enter the basement offices, and extending the building south with offices completely underground.



General Services Administration

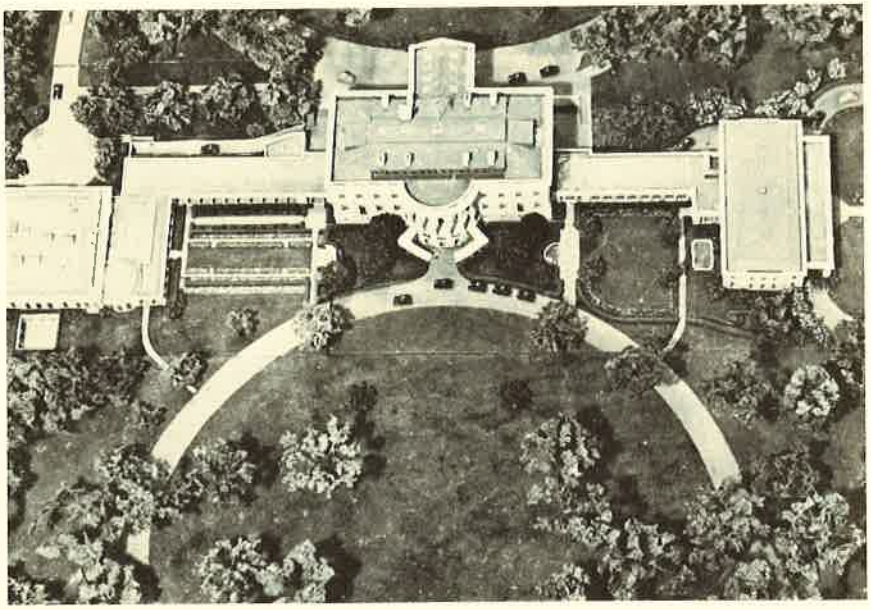
Figure 12. A 1960 view of the 1934 addition. (Compare with figure 11.)

THE EAST WING 1942

In 1942, on the east side, a total reconstruction, the first since 1902, took place. In this design, the architect, Lorenzo S. Winslow,[20] provided more office space and a motion picture theatre. Also on the east, an underground bomb shelter was constructed as a war-time precaution. This necessitated removing the fountain in front of the east entrance, which, curiously, although on White House property, had been constructed in 1867 by the Treasury Department, and was known, in fact, as the "Treasury Fountain".[21]

[20] Winslow was from 1934 until 1953 closely involved with the architecture of the White House. As an employee of the National Capital Parks, he worked on the 1933 swimming pool design, on the 1934 renovations with Gugler, and on various other reconstructions needed from time to time. In 1948 Winslow was designated Architect of the White House, a designation which continued until his retirement in 1953.

[21] The fountain was scheduled to be removed in 1942 but was not actually removed until 1946.



National Park Service

Figure 13. A photograph of a model of the White House and its wings in 1942. The East Wing is complete. The West Wing has been rebuilt. The sunken court is intact.

1948–1972

Because of the relatively modern construction techniques employed in the wings, from their origin in 1902 and thereafter, no need existed for their renovation in 1948–1952 when the mansion itself was completely gutted, save for the exterior walls, and then reconstructed.

In the years following, few structural changes were made to the wings. In 1970, the inadequate and unsightly awning over the north entrance of the West Wing was replaced by a neo-classical porte-cochere extending over a newly constructed circular driveway.

More recently attention has turned to the interior spaces. The offices, previously decorated in dismal colors and containing nondescript government-issue furniture, were transformed into an elegant, tasteful interior furnished in the style of colonial Williamsburg. The press room, formerly a cramped space without sufficient room for typewriters, telephones, or desks, is now located in the West Colonnade in spacious quarters created by placing a floor over the

Roosevelt swimming pool. Even the ticker tape machine has a suitable location, where once, as recently as the Eisenhower Administration, it occupied a corner of the men's lavatory.

Offices in the East Wing have been repainted and redecorated providing its occupants, the President's military aides and the First Lady's social secretaries, with more elegant working quarters. The

General Services Administration

Figure 14. The West Wing entrance in the 1960's. An awning has been replaced by a neon-lit canopy.

General Services Administration

Figure 15. The West Wing entrance in the 1970's. A small porte-cochere and circular driveway have been added. (Compare with figure 14.)

ground floor entrance, used for tours and official receptions, has remained unchanged since 1942 except for minor repairs.

It is unlikely that any significant alteration to the White House or its wings will occur in the future because, for any major changes, the Fine Arts Commission, the National Capital Planning Commission, and the Joint Commission on Landmarks, while not now so required

by law, undoubtedly would be requested to advise and approve such proposals. As these are groups which are especially concerned with preserving the beauty of the Palladian mansion they would hardly permit any change to occur which would affect the harmony of Hoban's design. There would also undoubtedly be strong public opposition to any significant exterior change in the White House. It is ironic that a century after Michler's proposal to move the residence, and maintain the White House for business purposes only, precisely the opposite has occurred. With the completion of the new office buildings in 1966 on Lafayette Square, the offices once in the Old Executive Office Building were removed to these new buildings. As a result, the majority of the presidential staff, now grown to more than 1,500, has taken over the vacated offices in the Old Executive Office Building. Even the President and the Vice-President maintain working offices in this building, the Vice-President having relinquished his personal office in the West Wing and the President making use of his Oval Office only for ceremonial purposes.

We can thus reasonably hope that the White House will be preserved as the Eighteenth Century building that it is, symbolic of and embodying an important part of the nation's early history.